

The Importance of Understanding Students' First Classroom Culture

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Abstract

Understanding learners' background is necessary to avoid misunderstanding of students' abilities and teach English effectively, especially in a multi-cultural classroom (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005; Hinkel 2001). The researcher investigated the challenges for Japanese students to improve their skills in academic writing by comparing English learners from different backgrounds. Data, in the form of interviews, was collected from three students in a university ESL program in the United States. Each participant is from a different cultural and language background such as Japan, Saudi Arabia and Mexico. Results indicate that different perceptions of sophisticated academic writing makes language learning more demanding in addition to language distance between student's L1 and English. On top of that the challenges in writing, the huge cultural differences between Japanese and Arabic students were observed from the interviews. Japanese students are scared of taking any risks in public because of the pressure to be perfect which does not exist in Arabic culture. In her role of English teacher, the researcher emphasizes the importance of instilling in students intercultural awareness and competency to maximize their language learning.

Key terms: Classroom Culture, Intercultural Communication, Language Instruction, Academic Writing, Higher Education

Introduction

Knowing students' culture is essential for an English language teacher to understand English learners deeply. Before I analyze three students from different countries, I will consider educational background as only a part of culture since so many elements make a student who s/he is: family environment, age and personality. However, through this small project, I have noticed the strong connection between students' behavior in class and their educational backgrounds. Although it is easy to ignore or dismiss because classroom culture is invisible, English language curricula are required to be sensitive about students' socio-cultural background (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005). Although English is spoken as a global language, the Western classroom standard has been widely considered as standard. The international students have been required to fix their native classroom culture to survive at a university in an English speaking country. According to Hinkel (2001), students have to understand the norm in the society to be socialized appropriately. Students' struggles with adjusting themselves in order to behave in a context-appropriate way when studying abroad can be seen regardless of their L2 fluency. Therefore, English instructors need to help students be aware that culture differences can cause misunderstanding or miscommunication in addition to language barriers.

To investigate how students act differently based on their cultural backgrounds, the data were collected from three high-intermediate English learners from Saudi Arabia, Mexico and Japan who enrolled in an ESL program preparing them to enter university in the United States. All of them had been studying in the ESL program for two months when they were interviewed. Their class had 17 students who were from all over the world such as China, Tanzania and Colombia. The researcher had known the participants since they came to the ESL program before conducting the interviews by observing their classes and communicating with them in and outside of the classroom.

This project focused on their literacy skills because many ESL/EFL instructors tend to neglect their transfer errors, which is influenced by their first culture and language (Bennui, 2008). To investigate and compare the participants' perceptions of making mistakes in class and understanding of academic writing in English, five 15-20 minute video-recorded interviews were conducted in Fall 2009. The interviews had two parts. In the first part, the participants were asked about their classroom cultures and attitude towards English reading and writing. In the second part, the participants were asked to read a paragraph aloud. The paragraph was given in the interviews although they could take as long as they needed to prepare reading it. The paragraph was written at a lower-intermediate level English which allowed the participants to focus on reading it. All the participants took approximately three minutes to complete the reading task on average. The researcher interviewed them as a group in the beginning of the study. Then, she conducted another private interview with the Japanese participant in Japanese since Japanese was the native language for the participant, Emi, and the researcher. From the qualitative data, the researcher found three major difficulties for Japanese students trying to adjust themselves to an English classroom. This research investigates the following questions. What kinds of characteristics of Japanese education can be obstructions to improve their academic writing skills in English? Also, why is becoming a good academic writer demanding for Japanese students? The following section explains Japanese students' anxiety about taking a risk in a language classroom before focusing on academic writing learning.

1. Pressure to Be Perfect

Japanese students try to fit into a group and be perfect in front of their classmates to protect face. In Japan, people are embarrassed or feel a loss of face when they make mistakes in public which can be considered "as bad as death" (Cheng, Huang, Lin, Sakoi, & Taniguchi, 2005; Huang, 2009). Since keeping harmony in a group is valued heavily in Japan, being unique or having a different opinion is perceived negatively and a student can feel a loss of face as a result of these.

There are two examples of how the Japanese participant, Emi, tried not to lose face during the project. First of all, she pretended to be in line with the other participants in the interview to keep the harmony in the group. When I asked everyone if they read in English or in their native languages, the Mexican participant, Carolina, and Arabic participant, Mohamed, answered that they read mostly in their L1. Emi answered, not really, but that she would love to read more to improve her reading and writing skills. After two or three questions, I noticed that Emi was not sharing her mind with the researcher in front of her classmates. She always answered last and gave similar answers to the others. Therefore, she and I had another meeting later, which was conducted in Japanese to better understand her perceptions of learning writing. Meeting privately reduced the pressure to be inline with the other participants. In the second interview, she told me that she does not read at all and did not like reading even in Japanese. Even trying to read made her exhausted. However, she did not want to speak honestly in the first interview because she thought it was wrong. She did not want to stand out among her classmates. Since having a different opinion would cause a loss of face, she could not share her mind in the interview (Huang, 2009).

Also, I saw how hard Emi tried to read perfectly aloud when reading a paragraph. She wanted to read and make sure that she knew how to pronounce all the vocabulary words in a paragraph before she tried to read it. When I saw how nervous she was, I told her that it was not going to be graded, and she was allowed to stop and ask qualification questions when needed. In fact, she neither stopped nor asked any questions while she was reading it. She made a big sigh and smile when she finished reading it, so it made

me realize how much pressure I had put on her during the interview. She told me that it reminded her of reading a textbook at an elementary school. At Japanese elementary school, students take turns reading the textbooks aloud. When the teacher nominates a student, s/he must stand up and read it aloud while the other students listen to her/him in silence. Students are pressured to read it perfectly in front of approximately 40 students in a classroom because the students are expected to know how to pronounce all the Chinese characters correctly. As indicated by Swan & Smith (2001), Japanese trust what they read more than what they hear because Japanese has many words which have the same sounds but are written differently.

Secondly, intonation does not carry meaning in Japanese; whereas, people use intonation to highlight the important information in English (Swan & Bernard, 2001). Thus, Japanese learners cannot distinguish which part of the conversation is the most important to communicate with each other and try to catch everything including prepositions and articles. This impossible task often leaves them lost in the conversation. Emi told me that when her friends used reductions in speaking, she could not understand what they were saying, but since this did not happen in writing, it was clearer. Also, she believes that if she can use grammar and spell the words correctly, she can communicate with native speakers. Therefore, writing is her preferred way to communicate with them. On the other hand, if she mispronounces a word, the listener may be confused. She needs to take more risks in speaking. These examples show why Emi is prone to trust her reading and writing skills more than her oral skills. The participant was afraid of not being able to read without stopping or mispronouncing the words whenever she needed to read aloud because of those experiences. Trying to be in line with the others and feeling a strong pressure to be perfect shows that it is culturally essential for Japanese students to feel comfortable in a language classroom. A language instructor needs to know students' cultural background to understand their behaviors and make them willing to learn in class. The following paragraph shows how different the pressure is in Saudi Arabia.

Comparison to the Arabic Speaker

The researcher found the largest cultural gap between Japanese and Arabic culture. Zollner, et al. (2003) stated that asking a questions and expressing their mind are encouraged to be an outstanding student in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the other students can answer a question if the student who is nominated by the teacher does not know the answer. Since Arabic students are not competitive in class, answering a question instead of the student or sharing what one knows verbally in front of everyone is considered as helping each other. Even cheating is accepted because helping friends is very important and that is a duty as good friends (Swan & Bernard, 2001; Zollner, et al., 2003). It was significant in the second part of the interview when the participants were asked to read a paragraph. The Arabic participant, Mohamed, was not worried about making mistakes or asking questions when reading the paragraph in the interview because he expected the others to help him when he was confused or having a problem. He stopped sometimes to make sure about the pronunciation and started using his finger to follow the paragraph after having difficulty locating where he was reading. Helping and accepting one's mistake was seen even outside of the classroom in the Arabic culture (Zollner, et al., 2003). Mohamed shared his story with the researcher in the interview to explain how Saudi Arabians place value on people. He had a car accident when he was driving his father's car. He called his father and told him what had happened. His father made sure Mohamed was fine and told him not to worry about the car because they could buy a new one. Comparing to a car accident, taking a risk and making a mistake are not tough for them. It could be said that the cultural backgrounds of the Arabic

participant and Japanese participant placed very different pressures on them when answering interview questions and reading the paragraphs.

2. Overgeneralization about Writing Assignment

Zollner et al. (2003) explain that composition is not taught after sixth grade at Japanese schools. The Japanese participant, Emi, did not have experiences writing an academic paper until she came to the U.S. She wrote letters for guest speakers at her elementary school as assignments. Emi did not differentiate between writing an academic paper such as an essay or journal from writing a letter. As a consequence, she applied the way of writing that she learned from her American friends to her journals during the fall semester, such as using “☺” and “cuz” in her journals. In addition, she made a side note when she could not spell the name of a cake that read, “I don’t know how to spell the word”. At the end of semester she started using casual expressions in her essay. For example, she used all capital letters to emphasize the word “brave”. Since writing letters is the dominant experience for Emi, she thought it was appropriate to apply the same writing styles and vocabulary to writing assignments and writing a letter. If she uses those in university classes, the professor may think that she does not take her assignment seriously or that the level of writing is inappropriate.

Comparison to the Arabic Speaker

Mohamed did not have this problem even though he uses slang everywhere when texting and chatting, such as “u are invited 4 sure” instead of saying that you are invited. Zollner, et al. (2003) insists that classrooms in Saudi Arabia are very teacher-oriented and the teacher is considered as a source of knowledge. Also, students respect teachers as Japanese students do. Thus, the relationship between teacher and students in both Japan and Saudi Arabia is very formal.

Although there are many similarities in Arabic and Japanese classrooms, the students behavior in an English classroom is very different. Based on the interview, the Arabic participant had never had a writing assignment before, so unlike Emi, he was able to make clear distinctions between sending a text and writing a journal or essay for his English class. For example, when he wrote about his mother in his journal, his work was outstanding. He had a hard time because his mother was sick back in Saudi Arabia, but his visa did not allow him to go back home. He described what she had done for him and how great she was by using his personal examples. Because of those vivid descriptions I could imagine how much he missed her and his struggle with focusing on his classes. He did not use any slang or inappropriate expression as he did with sending a text message on a cell phone. Moreover, his journal had clear organization such as an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. Mohamed acquire different writing styles in English and choose appropriate vocabulary words depending on contexts.

3. Difference Writing System between English and Japanese

Finally, Emi’s sentences tended to be choppy because the Japanese writing system is very different from English (Swan & Smith, 2001). There are two significant characteristics that she carried over from Japanese when she wrote in English which made her writing choppy. According to Swan & Smith (2001), since writing in English and Japanese are so different, Japanese readers of English recognize the language by syllables. To illustrate, number of letters is counted in Japanese, but the number of words is

counted in English. Furthermore, in Japanese writing, short sentences are encouraged to use because interpret and understand the writers' thoughts from fewer descriptions are considered as a reader's ability to communicate (Zollner, et al., 2003).

In addition, there are some differences from linguistic points of view between English and Japanese which makes Emi's sentences shorter. Some verbs in Japanese contain subject pronoun and objective pronoun, so Japanese students sometimes drop those. To illustrate, "I go there" can be simplified as "I go". Also, clause combining in English is not used in Japanese. Instead of combining clauses, Japanese use particles and postpositions, so Japanese students tend to use one-clause sentences with conjunctions (Swan & Smith, 2001). For example, "I am going to go to bed early today because I have to get up at 5 tomorrow." Can be "I am going to bed early today. Because I have to get up at 5 tomorrow." The following sentences are examples from Emi's writing. "Third, a location is important. Usually, a hot spring has open-air bath. If a hot spring is located on the hill or some high places, you can see excellent view. It is awesome. I like it very much." Her transfer errors happened because there are significant gaps between the values on English writing and the Japanese writing system.

Comparison to the Arabic Speaker and the Spanish Speaker

Arabic and Spanish learners have opposite problems from Japanese learners. Swan & Smith (2001), insist that punctuation is not important in Arabic. In addition, writers can use commas to connect sentences and keep writing without a period. In Spanish writing, the Spanish participant, Carolina, mentioned that longer sentences show one's intelligence, so as the children grow up, they try to make longer sentences. Therefore, both Arabic and Spanish speakers make many run-on sentences unlike Japanese speakers. If Emi and Carolina peer-edit each other's paper together without recognizing the gap between their writing systems, how will they feel about their writing? They may feel their writing is not sophisticated or lose interested in learning from each other's writing.

4. Limitations and Suggestions

There are some limitations that I am going to mention in this paper. First of all, the small amount of data limits the validity of the data. However, all the participants are the same age, have the same proficiency of English and started their ESL programs at the same time. Therefore, although the size of the sample is small the study could show their transfer from their L1 and cultural background clearly.

Another limitation is that the Japanese student was nervous in the interview and tried to adapt her opinions to meet the researcher's expectation. The researcher was older and was employed as a teacher assistant at the ESL program where the participants studied. This situation may have prevented the collection of honest perspectives from the participant.

As an English teacher, how can I deal with a multi-cultural classroom like having Carolina, Mohamed and Emi together in a class in the future? How can the teacher use students' different background beneficially? Also, how can the learners respect and learn from each other? Kramsch (1996) claims teachers need to bring up the cultural difference awareness in class so that students can understand each other and see the value from everyone. Nevertheless, it is a student's role to make bridges by themselves to communicate with each others (Kramsch, 1996). Teachers should be patient with themselves and students and familiarize themselves with students' cultural backgrounds. As a classroom practice, reading about cultural differences, having students share their studying abroad experiences in class and doing a role play to show the cultural differences and cultural shock during the

studying abroad period could be beneficial to raise awareness of cultural differences. Also, those activities help students raise their awareness of cultural distances among classmates in a culturally diverse situation. Classroom materials and activities should help students understand and respect cultural difference among their classmates.

Conclusion

Noticing the classroom cultural gaps among countries is essential to lead English language classrooms communicatively although it is challenging to observe. Fox (1994) insist that professors in an English speaking countries easily to think their standard is what students need to meet to be a “world class” student. Also, in a multi-cultural classroom, misunderstanding cultural differences can cause conflicts even among international students. As I expressed in the previous paragraphs, an English teacher has to be very careful to Japanese students not to embarrass them in class. On the other hand, Arabic students do not mind making mistakes. Also, writing with short sentences shows one’s ability to express their mind clearly in Japanese. On the other hand, making long sentences shows one’s intelligence in Spanish and Arabic writing. What shows one’s sophisticated writing skills is different from one language to another. Without understanding and respecting cultural difference, language learners are not able to use the language to communicate with each other. English instructors should carefully consider their expectations of the international students and help their learners to be aware of different expectations in a different culture.

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